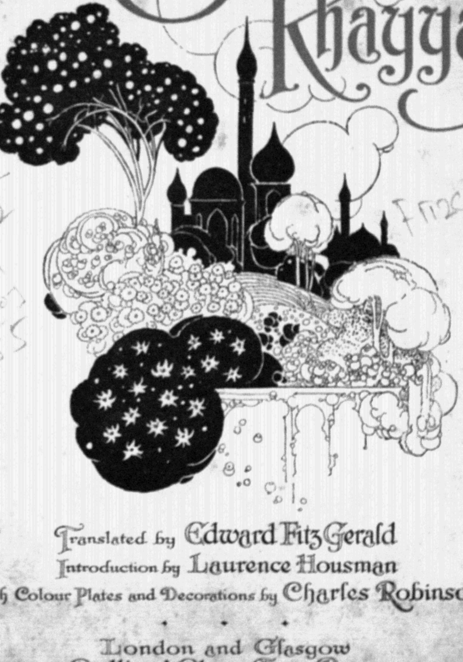
THE
RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM

Printed in Great Britain

Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight;
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.


CHARLES ROBINSON

The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám



Translated by Edward FitzGerald
Introduction by Laurence Housman
With Colour Plates and Decorations by Charles Robinson

London and Glasgow
Collins' Clear-Type Press

INTRODUCTION

FOR the great bulk of English readers—if in this connection a 'great bulk' of readers can be predicated—the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám means the one particular translation done so divinely well by Edward Fitzgerald, when the Victorian era was at its most self-centred and self-sufficient stage of development.

The poem made so little mark on its first appearance—so little mark with the critics and the general public, that is to say—that the original edition, passing out of sight, became presently a delightful rarity for the next generation of second-hand book-lovers to unearth, for the high appreciation in two kinds which was then awaiting it—the literary and the monetary. And it remains essentially, like all other translations —even the authorised version of the Bible—a second-hand book.

For the translator of poetry and vision always

stands between us and the original. And whatever the beauty, or the exact meaning of the original may have been, in this case we can hardly doubt that, for English minds, the translator has given to it a reconciling beauty and flavour of his own, which make it more acceptable to all but scholars or pedants.

Of this, indeed, we have proof in the very free and pliant variants of the rival versions—the earlier and the later—which are so fortunately available; and it is only necessary to compare Fitzgerald's amended form of the opening stanza with his original, to realise how large a liberty he gave himself when rendering into English the richly-coloured similes of the East.

> "Wake! For the Sun behind yon Eastern height
> Has chased the Session of the Stars from Night;
>   And, to the field of Heav'n ascending, strikes
> The Sultán's Turret with a Shaft of Light."

That is one version; this is the other, and the earlier :—

" Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight :
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultán's Turret in a Noose of Light."

Both are charming—many, I think, would hold that the earlier is the better ; but the existence of variants so widely different informs us definitely that Fitzgerald's rendering is an inspired paraphrase rather than a translation. What he began doing—westernising, the better to acclimatise, his importation from Persia in the eleventh to England in the nineteenth century—he went on doing with added touches and second thoughts throughout his elaboration of the whole poem : the strange similes, in the earlier version of the stanza just quoted, are softened and made more graceful in the amended one. And still more strikingly is this shown in the first line of the stanza which follows, where the fantastic imagery of the earlier version—

" Dreaming, when Dawn's Left Hand was in the sky "—

pronouncement of that day on the problem of life after death.

For these two poems appeared at a time when, while religious convention was still rampant, religious belief was beginning to seek new supports for the faith that was in it, though the outlook which is now called "modernist" had scarcely begun.

Faith, in the Victorian age, (we see it now) was a sort of St. Paul's Cathedral, which—though not perceptibly to the general eye—was beginning to shift on its foundations; and while it still held up an imposing facade, the under-pinning process had already started, and reconstruction was becoming inevitable.

It was at this juncture that these two poems appeared, both of an elegiac character—though it is not as an elegy that the *Rubáiyát* is generally regarded. *In Memoriam*, while incidentally written to commemorate the death of a friend, was in substance an elegy on a disintegrating form of faith, which in Tennyson's estimation could no longer be held by men of open mind, but only by their sisters. And

with considerable perturbation of spirit, and not without a certain distrust of that larger hope which he professes, Tennyson lets his weaker sister go to the wall under which she can still find shelter, and builds up for the rest his main thesis that immortality must surely be awaiting us, because it would have been so unfair of God to allow the human race to form false expectations.

The *Rubáiyát*—a more serene, more cheerful, and more contented document—is an elegy on all faiths whatsoever. It states its case with a certain touch of melancholy, but without any cry of distress. Too resigned to be poignant, too philosophical to be bitter about *it*, *it* dismisses the dream, and accepts with appetite—almost with gratitude—what is left.

That, at least, seems clearly the thesis of the original. But though Fitzgerald keeps up well his western end of it, and makes a brave show of not caring, it is on this very point that, here and there, the influence of his Victorian environment, with its sharpening interrogative, begins to creep in.

"The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Right or Left, as strikes the Player, goes."

There is the good, wise example set before us; but immediately, and in the same stanza, Fitzgerald himself departs from it, and asserts very emphatically that there is a Somebody outside who—

"Knows about it all—He knows—HE knows!"

And then, having asserted the existence of the Knowing One, he proceeds to rub in once more the impotence of human destiny:—

"With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man's
knead,
And then of the Last Harvest sowed the Seed:
And the first Morning of Creation wrote
What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read."

And thus launched on the high seas of Calvinism, he goes on further to adumbrate, for indignant protest, the possibility that divine punishment may be in store for those who enjoy life in their own way.

"What! out of senseless Nothing to provoke
A conscious Something to resent the yoke
Of unpermitted Pleasure, under pain
Of Everlasting Penalties, if broke!"

And so—leading up in a crescendo of indignation—to that famous final apostrophe:—

"Oh, Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's forgiveness give—and take!"

Now here it is pretty evident that Fitzgerald has caused his Omar to stumble against the Deity begotten by the theologians of Geneva; and his voice vibrates with passion, and his war-whoop is the war-whoop of a Victorian letting himself loose, because he has not the far, wise mind which can see ahead for a generation or two, and can afford to be patient and smile over a mirage that has only lasted for a few hundred years.

And so we see that though Fitzgerald might be

in revolt against the theology of his day, he could not indifferently escape it as though it did not exist. His Persian carpet was not so magic as to waft him away entirely from his "suburb grange" to the singing rose gardens of Naishapur.

But for all that he gave to English literature something that was new, beautiful, and permanent. Steadily through changing schools of expression, and changing interest in matters of technique, the form of expression here chosen has commended itself to minds differently trained, differently attuned, and still to its purpose seems perfect.

More than that: it would be difficult to name any single poem—long or short—written during the last hundred years which has so taken hold of the thought of succeeding generations, not necessarily for agreement with its ethical content, but for recognition. To a thesis which, without it, might have seemed soulless—materialism run to seed—it has given a dignity, a grace, and a logical force which 'orthodoxy' must reckon with. It is harder than it was formerly to damn a man theologically for believing

that, in this life, life as we see it is the only true guide.

"For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watch'd the Potter thumping his wet Clay;
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd, 'Gently, Brother, gently, pray!'

"And has not such a story from of old
Down Man's successive generations rolled
Of such a clod of saturated Earth
Cast by the Maker into Human mould?"

The argument is too humanly persuasive for our minds to escape from it. Without believing so much in the Potter—or pretending to know so much about Him as did the theologians of Geneva—here is a writer, a divine, who helps us to think better of Him, and to be sure—if He exists—that He is not so black as the theologians have painted him.

But while he gives us this certificate of the Potter's good character, and His kindly treatment of the clay—as clay, it is but a negative goodness of which he

assures us; and that, some are inclined to think, is not enough for the Potter Himself to rest content with.

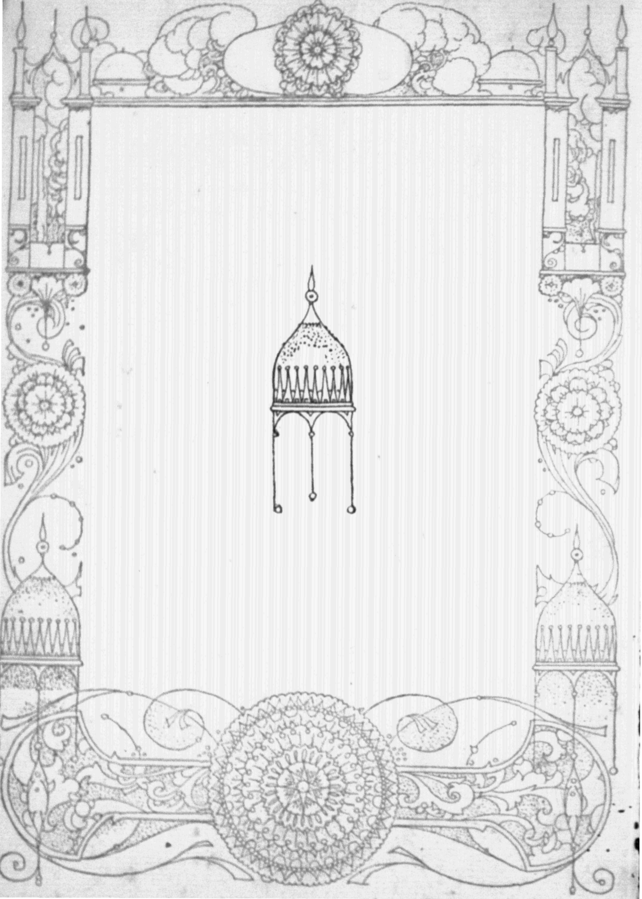
That is the crucial point where the philosophy of Omar and Fitzgerald stops short; they make a guess that the Potter exists, but they don't quite like to guess that He is as good as they are—and as interested in life. And so, while the Ayes and the Noes of this problem of human existence still entangle them more than they are aware, the Noes generally have it; and it is significant, I think, that at the one point in the whole poem where Fitzgerald breaks form, and, for the sake of added emphasis, inserts a redundant rhyme, the word he goes out of his way to insert is—'Lies.'

> "Oh, come with old Khayyám, and leave the Wise
> To talk; one thing at least is certain, that Life flies:
> One thing is certain and the Rest is Lies;
> The Flower that once has blown for ever dies."

There is an honest man overstating his case. Tennyson had a 'larger hope' which he did not call a

certainty; but he was not a liar for holding it. I myself am more inclined to share the doubts of Fitzgerald and Omar than the hopes of Tennyson, but I am by no means sure about it. Also the Potter may be improving in the manipulation of His material. Who knows? We have the authority of Fitzgerald for saying that the Potter Himself knows. If, then, the Potter is really improving in His craft, something more may come of it; we may even come to share His knowledge, without being adjudged 'liars.'

LAURENCE HOUSMAN.



I

AWAKE! for Morning in the Bowl of
Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to
Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has
caught
The Sultán's Turret in a Noose of Light.

II

DREAMING when Dawn's Left Hand
was in the Sky
I heard a Voice within the Tavern cry,
"Awake, my Little ones, and fill the Cup
Before Life's Liquor in its Cup be dry."

III

AND, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted—"Open then the Door!
You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more."

IV

NOW the New Year reviving old Desires,
The thoughtful Soul to Solitude retires,
Where the WHITE HAND OF MOSES on the Bough
Puts out, and Jesus from the Ground suspires.

V

IRAM indeed is gone with all its Rose,
And Jamshyd's Sev'n-ringed Cup where no one knows;
But still the Vine her ancient Ruby yields,
And still a Garden by the Water blows.

VI

AND David's Lips are lock't; but in divine
High piping Pehlevi, with "Wine! Wine! Wine!
Red Wine!"—the Nightingale cries to the Rose
That yellow Cheek of hers t'incarnadine.

VII

COME, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly—and lo! the Bird is on the Wing.

VIII

AND look—a thousand Blossoms with the Day
Woke—and a thousand scatter'd into Clay:
And this first Summer Month that brings the Rose
Shall take Jamshýd and Kaikobád away.

IX

But come with old Khayyám and leave the Lot
Of Kaikobád and Kaikhosrú forgot:
Let Rustum lay about him as he will,
Or Hátim Tai cry Supper—heed them not.

X

With me along some Strip of Herbage strown
That just divides the desert from the sown,
Where name of Slave and Sultán scarce is known,
And pity Sultán Máhmúd on his Throne.

XI

HERE with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

XII

"HOW sweet is mortal Sovranty!"—think some:
Others—"How blest the Paradise to come!"
Ah, take the Cash in hand and waive the Rest;
Oh, the brave music of a *distant* Drum!

XIII

LOOK to the Rose that blows about us—"Lo,
Laughing," she says, "into the World I blow:
At once the silken Tassel of my Purse
Tear, and its Treasure on the Garden throw."

XIV

THE Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face
Lighting a little Hour or two—is gone.

XV

AND those who husbanded the Golden
Grain,
And those who flung it to the Winds like
Rain,
Alike to no such aureate Earth are
turn'd
As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

XVI

THINK, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Doorways are alternate
Night and Day,
How Sultán after Sultán with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two, and went his
way.

XVII

THEY say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshýd gloried and drank deep:
And Bahrám, that great Hunter—the Wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, and he lies fast asleep.

XVIII

I SOMETIMES think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Cæsar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head.

XIX

AND this delightful Herb whose tender Green
Fledges the River's Lip on which we lean—
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen?

XX

AH, my Belovéd, fill the Cup that clears
TO-DAY of past Regrets and future Fears—
To-morrow?—Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years.

XXI

LO! some we loved, the loveliest and
the best
That Time and Fate of all their Vintage
prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two
before,
And one by one crept silently to Rest.

XXII

AND we, that now make merry in the
Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new
Bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch
of Earth
Descend, ourselves to make a Couch—for
whom?

XXIII

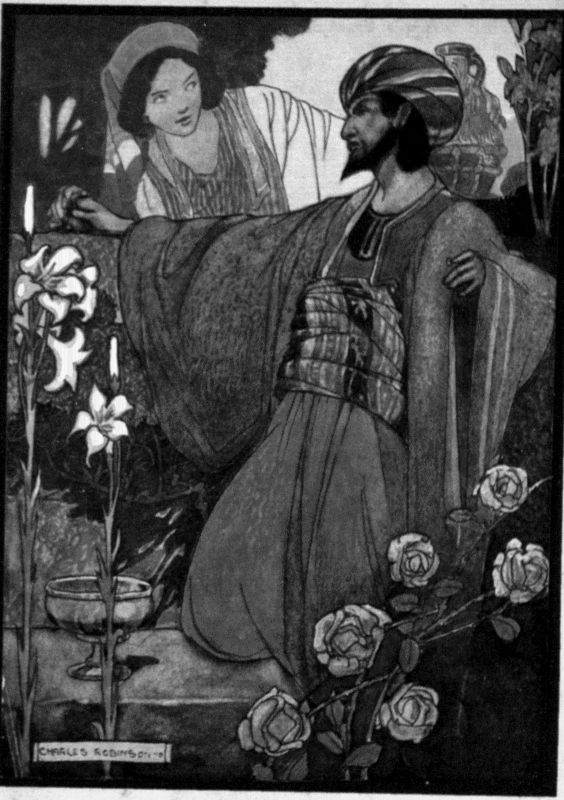
AH, make the most of what we yet
may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and—
sans End!

XXIV

ALIKE for those who for TO-DAY pre-
pare,
And those that after a TO-MORROW stare,
A Muezzín from the Tower of Dark-
ness cries
"Fools! your Reward is neither Here nor
There!"

QUATRAIN XX

Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
TO-DAY of past Regrets and future Fears—
To-morrow?—Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n Thousand Years.


CHARLES ROBINSON

XXV

WHY, all the Saints and Sages who discussed
Of the Two Worlds so learnedly, are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn
Are scattered, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

XXVI

OH, come with old Khayyám, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies.

XXVII

MYSELF when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same Door as in I went.

XXVIII

WITH them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own hand laboured it to grow:
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd—
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

XXIX

INTO this Universe, and *why* not knowing,
Nor *whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing:
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not *whither*, willy-nilly blowing.

XXX

WHAT, without asking, hither hurried *whence*?
And, without asking, *whither* hurried hence?
Another and another Cup to drown
The Memory of this Impertinence!

XXXI

Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate
I rose and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
And many Knots unravell'd by the Road;
But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.

XXXII

There was a Door to which I found no Key:
There was a Veil past which I could not see:
Some little Talk awhile of Me and Thee
There seem'd—and then no more of Thee and Me.

XXXIII

THEN to the rolling Heav'n itself I cried,
Asking, "What Lamp had Destiny to guide
Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?"
And—"A blind understanding!" Heav'n replied.

XXXIV

THEN to this earthen Bowl did I adjourn
My Lip, the Secret Well of Life to learn:
And Lip to Lip it murmured—"While you live
Drink! for once dead you never shall return!"

XXXV

I THINK the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer'd, once did live,
And merry-make; and the cold Lip I kissed
How many Kisses might it take—and give?

XXXVI

FOR in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watch'd the Potter thumping his wet Clay:
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd—"Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"

XXXVII

AH, fill the Cup:—what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn TO-MORROW and dead YESTERDAY,
Why fret about them if TO-DAY be sweet?

XXXVIII

ONE Moment in Annihilation's Waste,
One Moment, of the Well of Life to taste—
The Stars are setting and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing—Oh, make haste!

XXXIX

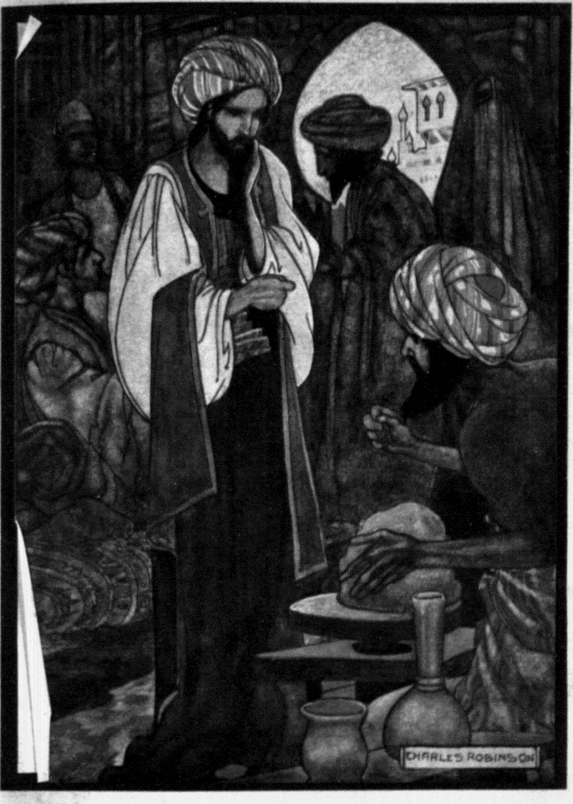
HOW long, how long, in infinite
Pursuit
Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful Grape
Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

XL

YOU know, my Friends, how long
since in my House
For a new Marriage I did make Carouse:
Divorced old barren Reason from my
Bed,
And took the Daughter of the Vine to
Spouse.

QUATRAIN XXXVI

For in the Market-place, one Dusk of Day,
I watched the Potter thumping his wet Clay:
And with its all obliterated Tongue
It murmur'd—"Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"


CHARLES ROBINSON

XLI

FOR "IS" and "IS-NOT" though *with* Rule and Line,
And 'UP-AND-DOWN' *without*, I could define,
I yet in all I only cared to know,
Was never deep in anything but—Wine.

XLII

AND lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Came stealing through the Dusk an Angel Shape
Bearing a Vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas the—Grape!

XLIII

THE Grape that can with Logic absolute
The Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute:
The subtle Alchemist that in a Trice
Life's leaden Metal into Gold transmute.

XLIV

THE mighty Mahmúd, the victorious Lord,
That all the misbelieving and black Horde
Of Fears and Sorrows that infest the Soul
Scatters and Slays with his enchanted Sword.

XLV

BUT leave the Wise to wrangle, and with me
The Quarrel of the Universe let be:
And, in some corner of the Hubbub coucht,
Make Game of that which makes as much of Thee.

XLVI

FOR in and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Played in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.

XLVII

AND if the Wine you drink, the Lip
you press,
End in the Nothing all Things end in—
Yes—
Then fancy while Thou art, Thou art
but what
Thou shalt be—Nothing—Thou shalt not
be less.

XLVIII

WHILE the Rose blows along the
River Brink,
With old Khayyám the Ruby Vintage
drink:
And when the Angel with his darker
Draught
Draws up to Thee—take that, and do not
shrink.

XLIX

'TIS all a Chequer-board of Nights
and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates,
and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

L

THE Ball no Question makes of Ayes
and Noes,
But Right or Left as strikes the Player
goes;
And He that toss'd Thee down into
the Field,
He knows about it all—HE knows—HE
knows!

LI

THE Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

LII

AND that inverted Bowl we call The Sky,
Whereunder crawling coopt we live and die,
Lift not thy hands to *It* for help—for It
Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

LIII

WITH Earth's first Clay They did
the Last Man's knead,
And then of the Last Harvest sowed the
Seed:
Yea, the first Morning of Creation
wrote
What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall
read.

LIV

I TELL Thee this—When starting from
the Goal,
Over the shoulders of the flaming Foal
Of Heav'n Parwín and Mushtara they
flung,
In my predestined Plot of Dust and Soul.

LV

THE Vine had struck a Fibre; which about
If clings my Being—let the Súfi flout;
Of my Base Metal may be filed a Key,
That shall unlock the Door he howls without.

LVI

AND this I know: whether the one True Light
Kindle to Love, or Wrath consume me quite,
One glimpse of It within the Tavern caught
Better than in the Temple lost outright.

QUATRAIN XLII

And lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Come stealing through the Dusk an Angel Shape
Bearing a Vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas—the Grape!


CHARLES ROBINSON

LVII

O THOU, who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with Predestination round
Enmesh me, and impute my Fall to Sin?

LVIII

O THOU, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And who with Eden didst devise the Snake;
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give—and take!

* * * * *

KÚZA—NÁMA

LIX

LISTEN again. One Evening at the Close
Of Ramazán, ere the better Moon arose,
In that old Potter's Shop I stood alone
With the clay Population round in Rows.

LX

AND, strange to tell, among the Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried—
"Who *is* the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

LXI

THEN said another—" Surely not in vain
My Substance from the common Earth was ta'en,
That He who subtly wrought me into Shape
Should stamp me back to common Earth again."

LXII

ANOTHER said—" Why, ne'er a peevish Boy
Would break the Bowl from which he drank in Joy;
Shall He that *made* the Vessel in pure Love
And Fancy, in an after Rage destroy!"

LXIII

NONE answered this; but after Silence spake
A Vessel of a more ungainly Make:
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry;
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?"

LXIV

SAID one—"Folks of a surly Tapster tell,
And daub his Visage with the Smoke of Hell;
They talk of some strict Testing of us—Pish!
He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well."

LXV

THEN said another with a long-drawn
Sigh,
"My Clay with long oblivion is gone dry:
But, fill me with the old familiar Juice,
Methinks I might recover by-and-bye!"

LXVI

SO while the Vessels one by one were
speaking,
One spied the little Crescent all were seek-
ing:
And then they jogged each other,
"Brother! Brother!
Hark to the Porter's Shoulder-knot a-
creaking!"

. . . . .

LXVII

AH, with the Grape my fading Life
provide,
And wash my Body whence the Life has
died,
And in a Windingsheet of Vine-leaf
wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side.

LXVIII

THAT ev'n my buried Ashes such a
Snare
Of Perfume shall fling up into the Air,
As not a True Believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware.

LXIX

INDEED, the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my Credit in Men's Eye much wrong:
Have drowned my Honour in a shallow Cup,
And sold my Reputation for a Song.

LXX

INDEED, indeed, Repentance oft before I swore—but was I sober when I swore?
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand
My thread-bare Penitence apieces tore.

LXXI

AND much as Wine has play'd the Infidel,
And robb'd me of my Robe of Honour—well,
I often wonder what the Vintners buy
One half so precious as the Goods they sell.

LXXII

ALAS, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript should close!
The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,
Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who knows?

LXXIII

AH, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

LXXIV

AH, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane,
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again:
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same Garden after me—in vain!

LXXV

AND when Thyself with shining Foot shalt pass
Among the Guests star-scattered on the Grass,
And in thy joyous Errand reach the Spot
Where I made one—turn down an empty Glass!

TAMAM SHUD.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

OMAR KHAYYÁM, the astronomer-poet of Persia, was born in the latter half of the eleventh century, at Nishapur, in the northern province of Khorassan, and is supposed to have died about the year 1123 A.D. The Grand Vizier of the second Sultan of the Seljukian dynasty, who had been a fellow-student of Omar's, obtained for him a yearly grant from the royal treasury, and he was thus enabled to devote himself entirely to the pursuits of science. Omar was no dilettante, but added notable contributions to the astronomical and mathematical learning of his day. His fame as a mathematician, however, is overshadowed by his greater renown as a poet; and his wit, his rhapsodies in praise of wine, love, and earthly joys, and a certain dark philosophy that lies behind all, have earned for him the sobriquet of the Voltaire of the East.

His English Translator, Edward Fitzgerald, was born at Woodbridge, Suffolk, in 1809. The son of

wealthy parents, he spent the first forty years of his life in quiet reading and study. When his powers had reached their full maturity, he became acquainted with the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in the original, and the translation of the old Persian poet provided Fitzgerald with the task for which he was supremely fitted, and which, with the exception of a few beautiful lyrics, stands out as his great achievement. He died in 1883.